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Speaking Notes for
THE HONOURABLE ROB NICHOLSON, P.C., Q.C.,
M.P. for Niagara Falls,
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

for the

2007 Law Day Event on the 25th Anniversary of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms

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Introduction

It is a great pleasure to meet with you this morning.

I am very happy to have this opportunity today to address you. As young people who will soon embark upon the world, you hold the key to the future of Canada. And as young people who have always lived under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, this is a good time to reflect on what it has meant to you, and not to take for granted the rights that we all have.

On Interest in Public Life and Law

Because we are celebrating Law Day, as well as the 25 th anniversary of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, I'd like to share with you a few reflections on public life and the law profession.

I must say that my first interest was to serve my country, and I was drawn to public life at a young age.

When I was 11 years old, our class was discussing the Cuban Missile Crisis. I wrote a letter to John Diefenbaker, who was Prime Minister at the time, about Canada's role in the crisis. He wrote back to me, and that is what inspired me to get into government.

As I got older and realized that most of the politicians I knew or heard of were lawyers, I began to consider the law profession seriously. And since Parliament enacts all the laws that govern our country; I thought that studying law would better prepare me for a career in public life.

I deeply respect the law, and I believe that practising law is an honourable profession. I have never regretted my choice.

I am also honoured to have been named Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. I am very proud to join the long list of distinguished Canadians who have held the portfolio before me – it is a role of great responsibility.

I am also pleased to have this opportunity to help fulfill the Government's promise to Canadians

and protect families and communities by cracking down on guns, gangs and drugs.

On the Canadian Bill of Rights

Our Government made this promise because peace, order and good government are the principles upon which our country came to be. These three attributes guided the creation of *The Constitution Act, 1867*, which also defined the principles under which a Canadian Parliament should legislate.

Canada has long been a champion of human rights. In fact, it was a Canadian – John Peters Humphrey – who was in charge of drafting the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was ratified in 1948.

The UDHR was one of Prime Minister Diefenbaker's inspirations for the Canadian Bill of Rights, which was enacted in 1960. The Bill of Rights was the earliest federal statute for human rights law in Canada, and Diefenbaker had often said it was his proudest achievement.

The Bill of Rights recognized the rights of individuals to freedom, personal security and the enjoyment of property.

It protected the rights to equality before the law, ensured protection before the law and protected freedom of religion, speech, assembly, association and the press.

The Bill of Rights is still in place today, but for the most part, our courts refer to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Both have positively contributed to Canada and its people.

On the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is entrenched in Canada's Constitution and it guarantees some of the fundamental freedoms that were originally in the Bill of Rights.

More specifically, it guarantees

- freedom of conscience and religion;
- freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
- freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- freedom of association.

Unlike the Bill of Rights, which only applies to federal laws, the Charter applies also to provincial and territorial laws.

The Charter also recognizes democratic rights, such as the right to vote. In the next few years, you will all be old enough to vote, so it is vital that you make yourself aware of the issues so that when the time comes, you will be responsible and knowledgeable voters.

It recognizes as well the equality of status of English and French as Canada's official languages, and to be educated in either one of these languages if you are part of a language minority in your province.

Some of these rights may seem obvious to all of you. You have lived your entire lives covered by the Charter. But we need to always remember that these rights had to be debated and fought for over many years. And in some parts of the world, these rights are still not being respected.

Much has changed in our country over the last 25 years. We were a diverse country then, and we are even more so now. It is important to remember that the Charter is a living document. It belongs to us, and it should reflect who we are as a nation, and who we are as individual Canadians.

Conclusion

Before I leave you this morning, I would like you to reflect on the words of John Diefenbaker: "I am a Canadian, free to speak without fear, free to worship in my own way, free to stand for what I think right, free to oppose what I believe wrong, or free to choose those who shall govern my country. This heritage of freedom I pledge to uphold for myself and all mankind."

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak here, and thank you for listening. I hope you enjoy the rest of Law Day.

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